

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

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Policy Studies



The Japan Forum on
International Relations

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International Affairs
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Research Institute for
Peace and Security

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No.14. 30 October 2007

REVISION OF ARTICLE 9 SHOULD ASSUME NEW SECURITY TREATY WITH US

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Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution prohibits Japan from using force “as means of settling international disputes,” which limits the missions of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to the task of self-defense as well as to the non-combatant roles in the Japan-US security arrangements and multinational peace-keeping operations sanctioned by the United Nations. Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who resigned in September 2007 after one year in office, the momentum for revision for the Constitution had picked up considerably.

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How will the revision of Article 9 affect the security treaty with the United States? This is a question I have been asking recently whenever the opportunity arises at workshops and international conferences. Logical thinking would dictate that the security treaty should change accordingly. Surprisingly, however, very few people seem to have given this question serious thought. The old international “common sense” was that a Japan free from the constraints of Article 9 would happily abandon the alliance with the United States and go down the road of militarism. Today such a view is in the overwhelming minority, perhaps only sustained in China and South Korea. What, then, would become of the security treaty with the United States once Article 9 is changed? Only a hopeless intellectual void exists where a response is needed.

A government official once told me that his section had indeed attempted an internal study on this subject. The official said, however, that the study had never gotten off the ground because the participants were afraid that going further into the study would trigger a myriad of speculations and suspicions both at home and abroad, spinning the whole issue totally out of control. That was probably the right political judgment. Still, what should we make of this state of affairs where the revision of Article 9 has been sought without giving serious consideration to its effects on the security arrangement with our closest ally?


One thing that is clear is that debates surrounding constitutional revision lack strategic thinking. There is not enough space here to define what strategic thinking is, but I think it should at least require a “system” that organically links all the components of a strategy. Both Article 9 and the Japan-US security treaty have been the strategic essence of Japan’s foreign policy since World War II. However, no consensus has ever emerged in postwar Japan to recognize the policies formulated by Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, which may be termed the Article 9 – Japan-US security treaty system, as Japan’s systematic strategy. It cannot be overemphasized here how unrealistic was the claim of the leftist camp to abandon the alliance with the United States for the sake of Article 9. Yet even within the ruling

Liberal Democratic Party, there was no clear agreement on recognizing the Yoshida line as a national strategic design. Right-leaning conservatives within the party who grudgingly accepted the Yoshida line have maintained their passion for constitutional revision, driven by a sense of humiliation over Japan's dependence on the United States.

The misfortune hidden in the argument for constitutional revision, which is gaining momentum these days, is that it is driven by the same inward-looking passion that has long prevented real strategic thinking in postwar Japan. It may be natural for Japanese to harbor a feeling that Article 9 and the dependence on the United States have made Japan's sovereignty incomplete. However, these are a crucial part of the products of the international realities surrounding Japan in the wake of World War II that were formed through successive events of what we call "that war," the subsequent occupation and new developments in international politics while Japan was under occupation. If there was any strategy at all on the part of Japanese policymakers at that time, it could have only possibly been found in sacrificing a certain degree of independence and national identity.

Therefore, it would be natural to assume that the desire for greater independence seeking a "departure from the postwar regime" should be directed not only at the Constitution but also at the Japan-US security treaty. When Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister, questioned the lack of an independent spirit in postwar Japan, I think his thought and ideology were actually demanding greater independence from the United States. As is often the case, emotionally-charged historical issues make this desire even stronger. Yet realities will not allow it to be realized any time soon. Indeed, the argument for constitutional revision will not go anywhere once it calls into question the continuous provision of the US security guarantee. That is why the Japan-US security treaty is sanctified by constitutional revisionists.

It would require a truly strategic way of thinking to overcome the limitations of the now prevalent argument for constitutional revision. The revision of Article 9 is

most likely to strengthen the security cooperation between Japan and the United States. Permitting the exercise of the right to collective self-defense, which was debated by a government panel under Prime Minister Abe, would require Japan to prepare for scenarios in which Japanese soldiers fight alongside their American counterparts. How is Japan going to deal with these situations without having a strategic bird's-eye view? Linking the debate on constitutional revision to that concerning the future form of the Japan-US security alliance should be the first step toward overcoming the “postwar trauma” and fostering forward-looking strategic thinking in this country. 

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